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SUBJECT: CYPRUS ASYLUM SERVICES STRUGGLING TO COPE WITH
ASYLUM APPLICATION BACKLOG

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Cyprus enjoys the highest per capita rate of asylum seekers in the European Union and is struggling with a backlog of nearly 8,000 asylum applications. RoC migration officials claim the majority pass through Turkey and the northern part of Cyprus en route to the government-controlled area. Many target Cyprus because of its position as the southeastern EU frontier state. The RoC's asylum services office and refugee reception facilities are understaffed, populated mainly by junior officials, and poorly funded, slowing processing and clogging the system -- some asylum applicants report wait-times of up to eleven years. Intermittent tsunamis of fraudulent applications strain the system as well. The new Minister of Interior seems committed to tackling the problem, but has proven unable to push the bureaucracy to institute policy changes. Finally, a degree of Cypriot xenophobia fosters a lack of urgency regarding asylum issues in general. END SUMMARY.

Arrivals Are Rising, But Processing Slow

12. (SBU) The Asylum Services department of the Cypriot Ministry of Interior is struggling to cope with a per capita asylum claim rate that is the EU's highest, which has resulted in a backlog of nearly 8,000 applications. Strikingly, while the number of asylum seekers in the EU-27 dropped 50 percent from 2000 to 2006, Cyprus saw a 1,000 percent jump in the same period. Although Asylum Services has received over 30,000 applications since 2002, it has awarded refugee status only to 65 applicants and granted humanitarian status to just 286 more. Asylum applicants complain of waiting eleven years or more for closure of their cases. Government officials and clients alike admit that the system is broken and the backlog unacceptable.

Causes of Influx Are Many, Including Easy Access from Turkey and the north

13. (SBU) According to Asylum Services head Makis Polydorou, Turkey's laxness in controlling illegal migration flows and an unsecured Green Line are two of the primary reasons for the high number of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers in Cyprus. During a June 20 conversation, Polydorou alleged

that the Turkish Army facilitates the movement of migrants and asylum seekers through Turkey and the north of Cyprus, across the Green Line and into Republic of Cyprus-controlled territory. Interior Minister Neoklis Sylikiotis publicly stated on June 13 that the government cannot effectively control the line "because of the Turkish occupation." Many actually are economic migrants from third countries, such as the many Syrians who enter the north via the Famagusta-Antalya-Latakia ferry.

High Volume: On the EU Frontier

¶4. (U) Maltese European Parliamentarian Simon Busuttil, speaking at June 13 EP conference in Nicosia on EU Immigration Policy, noted another factor behind the disproportionate number of asylum applicants and illegal immigrants in Cyprus: its location on Europe's southeastern frontier. By default, the island acts as first stop and clearinghouse for EU-bound refugees. Busuttil explained that neighboring southern European frontier states such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Malta all faced similar migratory pressures as Cyprus. He noted that burden-sharing by northern European countries, a definitive EU-wide immigration policy, and greater EU solidarity on asylum/refugee issues would greatly enhance the southern states' ability to respond humanely and quickly to migrants' needs. It was unfair of the northern states and the EU as a whole to make demands regarding enforcement and integration of migrants yet expect southern European states to pick up the tab and go it alone.

Lack of Resources

¶5. (SBU) Asylum Services also cites a lack of resources as a major factor in its struggle to cope with the influx of asylum seekers and applications backlog. Polydorou revealed that his division employs just 20 employees to process and

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investigate asylum claims, although he plans to hire 30 more. However, according to a well-connected journalist at English-language daily "Cyprus Mail," the Minister of Finance granted Asylum Services only four additional slots. Operationally, the Asylum Reception Center at Kofinou is ill-equipped and ill-suited to deal with massive flows of migrants. It has a capacity for only 150 people, and, after a series of harassment incidents, now accepts only families and single women; adult males are given a small stipend and left to find their own shelter. Direct assistance for applicants is scarce as well, as asylum applicants receive just 350 euros per month, an amount insufficient to cover medical services, language training, and other costs. After six months have passed, asylum applicants can work, but only in the agricultural sector.

Inefficient Process

¶6. (SBU) Inefficient processing, coupled with a lack of expertise from its relatively junior staff, clogs the system and adds to the backlog. Polydorou noted that Asylum Services was established only in January 2002, following the enactment of the Refugee Law in 2000. Prior to 2002, the RoC partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR. Doros Polykarpou, the director of migration rights NGO KISA, lamented the long asylum claim processing times during a June 24 meeting with Embassy staff. Polycarpou claimed refugees often waited three to four years between their initial contact with the government and any follow-up. Such delays kept them in a dangerous limbo.

¶7. (SBU) Asylum Services is making efforts to streamline the

asylum-application process. Netherlands Embassy contacts revealed recently that the European Refugee Fund has approved monies for a joint proposal by the Cypriot and Dutch services to improve reception facilities and speed claims processing for asylum seekers. Polydorou asserted that his office had "fast-tracked" asylum seekers from certain countries and groups, including Iraqi refugees, in an effort to speed up the system. Asylum Services also had placed six experienced adjudicators at the Kofinou Reception Center to immediately capture asylum information. KISA's Polycarpou doubted the efficacy of that move, however.

Fraud/ Abuse, Too

¶8. (SBU) Both Polycarpou and Polydorou acknowledged that fraud and abuse of the asylum system is occurring and contributing to the backlog. Many applicants truly are economic migrants, especially the Syrians. Further, immigrant leaders in the Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi communities, often serving as translators for the police or migratory services, have activated waves of false asylum seekers by promising to use their influence with the government to help other refugees. Polydorou claimed that such misinformation caused the 2004 wave of asylum applications (an all-time high of 9,285 submitted in one year). Polycarpou stated there were also cases of attorneys advising individuals to file for asylum once their residency permits expired.

Bureaucratic Blocking Doesn't Help

¶9. (SBU) Polycarpou revealed that Interior Minister Sylikiotis was having a difficult time instituting new migration and asylum policies because of resistance from unwelcoming staff and pushback from other ministries. The Minister, who was also a founding member of KISA, has complained to Polycarpou that he holds meetings every week to explain the changes in asylum applications policy, and every week, the situation stays the same. Sylikiotis had also asked the Ministry of Labor to increase the number of sectors where asylum seekers could work, but his request was refused. Allegedly, the Minister is now furious because every staff member he brought into Asylum Services is attempting to transfer out.

Comment

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¶10. (SBU) Many factors contribute to the asylum application backlog, but just a few are under Cyprus's direct control. Funding more full-time Asylum Services positions would go a long way towards processing applications quickly and clearing out the system. Also, Cyprus would benefit from following Malta's lead in building a stronger case for additional EU funding for countries on the frontier of Europe. Weeding out translators and attorneys who abuse the asylum system is another way to cut the backlog, or at least prevent it from lengthening. But the greatest potential improvement lies in Sylikiotis's efforts to implement systemic change and create an atmosphere that is asylum- and refugee-friendly. The job won't be easy or quick, and the Minister must confront a degree of xenophobia that underpins the lack of urgency in dealing with the refugee/asylum problem here. Cyprus historically exported migrants. Its citizens have little experience dealing with the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, and its officials seem uncomfortable tackling the problem. For example, media recently ridiculed the government's decision not to file a mandated EU Racism Report because, according to one RoC official, "there is no racism

in Cyprus." Recent hate crimes, including an attack on four non-natives in Ypsonas village and a violent incident in a Limassol mosque, reveal a different aspect of the local reality, however.

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